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Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen: Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870-1920*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006. xi + 277 pp. \$45.00 (hb). ISBN 0-8014-4464-0.

Review Essay by Robert A. Nye, Oregon State University.

Judith Surkis' powerful and elegantly written book finds new insights in texts that we thought we understood and useful connections between subjects ostensibly remote from one another. Thus, in their parallel concern with articulating a model of a self-regulating, familial, and procreative male sexuality, Republican pedagogues of the 1870s and 1880s shared a common set of concerns with military hygienists before and during World War I. Moreover, critics of the secondary school *internat* came both from the progressive left of the republican political spectrum and its extreme right, and, finally, virtually everyone worried about how to integrate bachelors, soldiers, adolescents, and colonial natives into a sexual order governed by the complementary attractions of differently-sexed individuals. The aim of all this theorizing and hygienic activity was to define and shore up a normative conception of male desire that was notoriously intractable in some men, dangerously weak in others, and disturbingly labile in the messy reality of social life. There were excellent reasons for embarking on such a project, many of which have been written about elsewhere: the depopulation crisis; the weakened military posture of the nation; a host of social pathologies that drew men away from the fertile embraces of the *foyer*; and the need after 1870 or so to form a new Republican citizen who was autonomous, morally self-regulating, and patriotic.

Of course we are talking about heterosexual desire, a term not yet in general usage in the *fin-de-siècle*, except in a few psychiatric textbooks, the meaning of which was still unstable at the time. As Surkis demonstrates, even without the word, heterosexuality was a concept that everyone managed to describe in one way or another, often as the opposite of same-sex desire, even when that dreaded passion was not directly named. Indeed, the original aspect of this study is the way that Surkis tracks the grammar of male desire through thickets of philosophical, sociological, and administrative discourse that did not possess, or whose authors did not choose to employ, the clinical language of bio-medical expertise. She dissects with great finesse the imaginative euphemisms for sexual failure employed by the many proponents of conjugality, and she shows convincingly how the widespread anxiety about disorderly male desire produced multiple strategies designed to help men master their own sexual passions and channel them in the appropriate directions. She also shows that prewar worries about venereal disease, which spawned manifold plans to educate young men about the dangers of infection, were dramatically heightened in the course of the war itself, producing a regulationist regime that partly undercut the moral voluntarism favored by most hygienic reformers. As she concludes, the conjunction of the long-standing program to manage male desire and the hygienic concerns that culminated in the war produced a new norm of masculine citizenship in which marriage and procreation were not only rights but also duties.

Doctors and *aliénistes* were effectively occupied with the same set of concerns; Sander Gilman and many others have shown how bio-medical language and concepts gradually made their way into technical and popular discourses.[1] However, apart from her concluding chapters on sexual hygiene and venereal disease, Surkis does not rely heavily on the parallel universe of medical literature but picks and chooses her texts, usually to good effect. She wishes to emphasize the instability of concepts of male desire and the constructedness of attempts to articulate it into social institutions, the better to make her point that it was "contingently constituted and regularly reconfigured" and therefore never convincingly present or reliably predictable (p. 8). This way of characterizing the effort to "sex the citizen" allows her to make

its ostensibly constructed character the source of both the anxiety about male heterosexual desire and the urge to regulate it. Surkis dismisses any notion that men's sex was "fixed" in some "event" as a "coherent entity"; she wants to focus on the process in which masculinity and male desire was constantly being "imagined and re-imagined" (p. 7). In effect, she eschews any suggestion that a "formerly stable, bounded, liberal male individual" was suddenly challenged by some crisis or other in the *fin-de-siècle*; rather, discourses of masculinity are always in a state of disequilibrium (p. 11).

This is good method. But I would like to raise a few questions and make some observations. First, Surkis teases out mechanisms of sociality rather than appeals to "nature" to underline the conviction of many contemporaries that masculine desire was a precarious, emergent entity, not a settled biological fact. Emile Durkheim, Henri Marion, Ferdinand Buisson, and others avoid biological terminology as they seek ways to locate and describe heterosexual desire. Durkheim's sociological project in particular disposed him to find sociohistorical explanations for all social phenomena, including heterosexuality, at least at a rhetorical level (p. 175). But even Durkheim could not resist the temptation to naturalize the social. The ubiquity of neo-Lamarckian evolutionary theory, widely appropriated by social scientists in the late nineteenth century, facilitated a slippage between the natural and the social. French evolutionists resisted explanations based on natural selection in favor of a mechanism that stressed the plastic adaptation of organisms to their environments. In this way the social became the biological. As Durkheim wrote in an article on suicide and the birth rate in 1888: "Organic causes are often social causes transformed and fixed in the organism."^[2] My point here is that the search for some kind of pure social causation on epistemological terrain that sees the biological and the social as causally reciprocal is bound to fail. What was fixed in an organism in one environment could be undone in another. It seems to me better to treat both biological and social explanations of masculinity or heterosexuality as unstable and to consider any move to define them, whether sociological or biological, as an effort to establish a natural kind.

I think one effect of Surkis' focus on sociality, contingency, and moral education is that we learn more about what masculinity was *not* than what contemporaries thought (or hoped) it was or might become. The specter of homosexuality was always present, as were other forms of (especially youthful) sexual excess, but the form that a more self-regulated and socially useful masculine sexuality ought to take never seems to assume a concrete form. To what should a young man aspire? Who were the virile models he should emulate? What manly qualities should he cultivate? What regimens could build a healthy body? As Chris Forth has shown in *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood*, at this time there was a superfluity of virile models and particular methods for developing manhood in high and popular culture alike.^[3] Highly materialistic notions of male sexuality that stressed potency and the mastery and protection of women were invariably embedded in these gender ideals. Charges of impotence and effeminacy also flourished in the public discourse of the affair, but no one was in much doubt about how the alpha males of the era should look like and behave.

By contrast, Ferdinand Buisson's notion of "the mastery of sensibly determined affects" (p. 33), or Henri Marion's efforts to rehabilitate "affect for ethical action" (p. 53) seem vague and indeterminate. Perhaps this is why republican moral reformers and right-wing critics all focused on the sexual vices that festered behind the walls of the *internat* rather than on the specific qualities that should be inculcated in young men. Despite some wonderfully sensational material on the ways that sex-segregated schools were ruining boys for healthy heterosexuality, I was not sure from Surkis' account what reforms of the *internat* were expected to do. She spends far more space cataloguing the failings of the system and broad denunciations by Maurice Barrès and others of the dire effects of republican moral philosophy than in discussing the nature of the working curriculum or the precise reforms that were intended to ameliorate the sexual demoralization of pupils. Did the debates between the proponents of the "ancient" and "modern" curricula address these problems in a substantial way?

I have another query. I think the developmental model that Surkis uses to understand the essentially pedagogical mission of those hoping to teach heterosexual self-mastery to the young is quite successful in explaining how students, soldiers, and colonial natives, as would-be citizens, could be “sexed.” However, this model for turning boys into responsible married men was shaped by middle-class professionals and defended by middle-class politicians, and as a result it looks to be as much a class project as a national and republican one. Such a model does not seem particularly well suited for dealing with young boys from the peasantry or the urban working classes whose parents practiced different kinds of marital conjugality and whose children attended different kinds of schools than bourgeois families. Of course, all boys eventually did their military service, but the pedagogy they experienced there was of a hygienic kind and was apparently largely ineffectual until some teeth were put into sanitary regulations during the war. Did the republican pedagogues consider how to evaluate and address class differences, or is this essentially middle-class professional project just another historical instance of the self-delusions of class?

Finally, I would like to observe that the fifty-year period this book deals with needs to be integrated into the long run of modern French history before it can be properly appreciated. There were earlier attempts to “sex the citizen,” of course, not least during the French Revolution itself, and a perpetual medico-clerical effort to defend and justify procreative, marital sexuality well before and after 1789. Arguably, each of the nineteenth-century political revolutions produced a relevant discourse designed to adapt citizenship to masculine *capacité* and vice versa. Suzanne Desan and Jennifer Heuer have recently analyzed the complex negotiations between sex and citizenship in the 1790s and through the composition of the Code Napoléon.^[4] How did the efforts of the social theorists, philosophers, and hygienists of the early Third Republic resemble or differ from those of earlier (or later) eras? Can we assume that the “sacralization” of heterosexuality, *avant la lettre*, has always been an essential component of male citizenship? And how, after 1944, did women fit into this model?

Let me conclude by praising an aspect of this valuable book that is not always present in much contemporary cultural history. I refer to the luminous, profoundly nuanced textual readings that compose the bulk of this book. Those who have always admired intellectual history as it is practiced by the great masters of the form, such as Surkis’ teacher Dominic LaCapra, will find this book a worthy exemplar of the *genre*, though it is also much more than that. Even when one does not agree with Surkis’ readings, the arguments are advanced with exceptional clarity and persuasiveness and with an eye to the alternative readings that must be confronted. *Explication de texte* will never die so long as it is in such capable hands. This book fills an important lacuna in the gender history of the Third Republic.

NOTES

[1] Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[2] Emile Durkheim, “Suicide et natalité: Étude de statistique morale,” *Revue philosophique de la France et de l’étranger* 26, no 11 (1888): 461. I have discussed Durkheim’s treatment of organic and social causation in “Heredity, Pathology and Psychoneurosis in Durkheim’s Early Work,” *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* 4 (1982): 103-142.

[3] Christopher E. Forth, *The Dreyfus Affair and the Crisis of French Manhood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004).

[4] Suzanne Desan, *The Family on Trial in Revolutionary France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); and Jennifer Ngaire Heuer, *The Family and the Nation: Gender and Citizenship in Revolutionary France, 1789-1830* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).

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See also the Review Essays on this book by Judith F. Stone, Florence Tamagne, and Karen Offen, as well as Judith Surkis's response to all four Review Essays.

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